Methodology of Semantic Fieldwork

Matthewson 2004

LING 510 – INTRODUCTION TO SEMANTICS

April 1, 2015

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†These slides are based on Matthewson (2004) as well as materials that Suzi Lima and Elizabeth Bogal-Allbritten have prepared for previous instantiations of LING 510.
Truth conditions vs Felicity conditions

- Sentences have both TRUTH CONDITIONS and FELICITY CONDITIONS. It is important to distinguish both.

1. TRUTH CONDITIONS: The conditions under which a sentence is true. To know the TRUTH CONDITIONS of a sentence is to know *what the world would have to look for it to be true.*

   ⇒ $S$ is true if and only if $p$

2. FELICITY CONDITIONS: The discourse situations that make a sentence acceptable.

   These also include **presuppositions** and **implicatures**.
Truth conditions vs Felicity conditions

- **Situation:** At the restaurant, deciding what to eat.

  (1)  
  \(A:\) Alright, so Mary wants fish, right?
  
  a.  \(B:\) No, Al wants fish.
  
  b.  \(B':\) No, it is Al who wants fish.

  (2)  
  \(A:\) Alright, has Al made a decision?
  
  a.  \(B:\) Yes, Al wants fish.
  
  b.  \(B':\) #Yes, it is Al who wants fish.

- Although (2a) and (2b) are intuitively **true** in the same circumstances, they are not **felicitous** in the same circumstances.
Ambiguity vs vagueness

- **Ambiguity**: A sentence is ambiguous if it has two (or more) interpretations which differ in their truth conditions.

  (3) Now you can swim in the lake.
  
  a. Now you have permission to swim in the lake.
  
  b. Now you have the physical ability to swim in the lake.

- **Vagueness**: A sentence is vague if some aspect of its meaning is not precisely specified.

  (4) a. Bill is tall.
  
  b. That mountain is small.
The Method: Direct elicitiation

There are several methods that linguists may use to do semantic fieldwork.

1. **Recorded material**: Using material that is available in the object language, like dictionaries, corpora, stories, recorded and transcribed conversations, etc.

2. **Direct elicitation**: A method of investigation whereby the investigator interviews a native speaker of the object language with the aim of gathering linguistic data. It involves asking *translations* and *judgments*.

⇒ For the second JYW project you will learn and use the second method!
Why direct elicitation?

- Advantages of recorded material:
  1. They can be more accessible than native speakers.
  2. Words and sentences always appear in felicitous contexts.
  3. In the case of understudied languages, it is a good place to start.
Why direct elicitation?

- Disadvantages of recorded material:
  1. They may contain errors and imprecisions that you don’t even realize they exist.
  2. Your object language may be poorly documented, if at all!
  3. **Negative evidence**: It provides information about when a linguistic expression **cannot** be used. This is often *as important as* knowing when it can be used! Recorded materials do not contain negative evidence!
  4. **Insufficient** for semantic analysis: They often do not contain information about the full range of contexts that support some particular interpretation of a sentence, or the use of some form.
Why direct elicitation?

Example: Suppose you are investigating the meaning of *me*, a possessor morpheme in Menominee (data from the linguist Leonard Bloomfield as reported in Matthewson 2004).

(5)  

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. } & \text{o-se:t} & \text{b. } & \text{me-se:t} \\
& \text{3poss-foot} & & \text{ME-foot} \\
& \text{“his foot”} & & \text{“someone’s foot / a foot”}
\end{align*}
\]

The morpheme *me* attaches to “inalienables”, a particular kind of nouns – body parts, kinship, part–wholes, etc. It indicates that the noun isn’t possessed.
Why direct elicitation?

- **Prediction**: (6a) should only mean that he makes a pack is “unpossessed” (e.g., form someone else); (6b) should only mean that the man carrying the pack owns the pack.

(6)  

- a. \([\text{me-e-}:\text{wan-ae:hkae}]\)-w  
  \text{ME-pack.inalienable-3}  
  “he makes a pack”

- b. \([\text{pes-kae:qc-[o-e:was-i]}}\]-w  
  \text{come.big-3poss-pack-3}  
  “he brings a pack”

Problem: The translations provided by Bloomfield are insufficient to determine whether the analysis is right!
Why direct elicitation?

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- **Problem**: The translations provided by Bloomfield are insufficient to determine whether the analysis is right!
What direct elicitation is not

To keep in mind!

Direct elicitation does not involve direct inquiry about meaning.

1. **Reason 1**: Fieldworkers cannot obtain direct access to **truth conditions**.
   
   *Example*: Try to explain the conditions under which (7) is true.

   (7) Cleopatra got up before dawn on her twentieth birthday.

2. **Reason 2**: Fieldworkers cannot obtain direct access to **felicity conditions**.
   
   *Example*: Try to explain the felicity conditions of the English word *the*. 
What direct elicitation is **not**

⇒ Fieldworkers must obtain **indirect** clues to TRUTH CONDITIONS and FELICITY CONDITIONS.

- The indirect clues come from two types of elicitation tasks: asking for **translations** and asking for **judgments**.

- Judgments are usually used more often than translations.

- There are two types of judgments: about **TRUTH VALUES** and about **FELICITY**.
Asking for translations: When

1. When you don’t know how to say something in the object language.

2. When you know that an English sentence can be translated in two or more ways in the object language, and you want to know what the most natural/preferred way is. (Usually a question about a judgment follows.)

3. When you are investigating a particular expression and you want to get the sentence first and then ask for a judgment and/or change it minimally and ask for a judgment.
Asking for translations: How

The Rule

Ask for translations of complete sentences only.

- Any piece of language smaller than a sentence (e.g., a morpheme, a phrase, a complex expression, etc.) can very often have a meaning that does not have an easy definition and therefore cannot be translated by a native speaker.

- Just like you cannot ask directly for the meaning of *the*, you cannot directly ask for its translation.

- Instead, the strategy is to ask for **sentences containing the**.
Asking for translations: How

- **Example 1**: Consider *all, each and every*. Their meaning is very similar, right?
Asking for translations: How

Example 1: Consider all, each and every. Their meaning is very similar, right?

(8)  a. All the students work hard.
    b. * {Every / each } the student(s) work hard.

(9)  a. {Every student / all students } met in the hallway.
    b. * Each student met in the hallway.

(10) a. The students read two articles each.
    b. The students read two articles * {all / every }.
Asking for translations: How

- **Example 2:** Consider the English suffix *-ing*. Try to translate/explain its meaning.

You need to account for all the data below:

(11) a. Philomena is dancing.
Asking for translations: How

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You need to account for all the data below:

(11)  a. Philomena is dancing

    b. A: Why are you so worried these days?

        B: Philomena is smoking again.
Asking for translations: How

Example 2: Consider the English suffix -ing. Try to translate/explain its meaning.

You need to account for all the data below:

(11)  a. Philomena is dancing.
    
    b. A: Why are you so worried these days?

    B: Philomena is smoking again.

    c. *I am seeing a lighthouse and some seagulls.
Asking for translations: How

- *Example 2:* Consider the English suffix *-ing*. Try to translate/explain its meaning.

You need to account for all the data below:

(11)  a. Philomena is dancing.

b. A: Why are you so worried these days?

   B: Philomena is smoking again.

c. *I am seeing a lighthouse and some seagulls.*

d. Philomena is seeing David these days.
Asking for translations: How

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   B: Philomena is smoking again.

c. * I am seeing a lighthouse and some seagulls.

d. Philomena is seeing David these days.

e. Jones runs down the field, Smith tackles him, Jones falls, he screams in pain!
Asking for translations: How

▶ Example 3: It could be that the target expression may have no direct counterpart in the meta-language (example from Basque).

    come ??? aux.ITR-1
    “He {must / may} have come”, “Maybe he came”, “It is said he came”...

▶ Example 4: It could be that the interpretation of certain constituents varies depending on the surrounding environment of the sentence. For instance, if you ask a Mandarin speaker for a translation of the phrase DET dog, they might translate it as the dog when it comes in preverbal position, but as a dog when it appears in postverbal position.
Asking for translations: Checklist

1. Ask for translations of complete sentences only.
2. Try to make the source string a grammatical sentence.
3. Assume that the result string is a grammatical sentence.
4. Treat translations as a clue rather than a result.
5. Disregard all apparent information about FELICITY CONDITIONS.
6. Avoid asking for translations of ambiguous or vague sentences.
7. Provide discourse contexts where required: to ensure felicity, to disambiguate, and when eliciting information about discourse-sensitive phenomena.
8. Do not ask your consultant to conduct ANALYSIS by asking her to observe a meta-language construction and produce something similar in her language.
Legitimate vs Ilegitimate Judgments

▸ **JUDGMENT**: An opinion that a native speaker is qualified to give, by virtue of knowing the language.

▸ **COMMENT**: Anything else the speaker might want to say about the structure or meaning of a linguistic expression.

▸ There are three kinds of JUDGMENTS:

1. Grammaticality judgments.
2. **TRUTH VALUE** judgments.
3. **FELICITY** judgments.
Eliciting judgements: Why?

To keep in mind!

By definition, one cannot ask for either a truth value judgment or a felicity judgment in the absence of a discourse context.

- So, why contexts?
  1. It can help disambiguating sentences with more than one interpretation. (13) may have two interpretations:

     (13) Now you can swim in the lake.

     a. You now have permission to swim in the lake.

     b. You now have the physical ability to swim in the lake.
Eliciting judgements

2. Some sentences may seem infelicitous to the consultant unless a context is provided. This is particularly important in the case of presuppositions:

(14) Fish, Mary likes.

(15) Jon Anderrek oilasko-a jan du.
     Jon Ander.ERG chicken.DET-ABS eat aux-TR-3
     “Jon Ander ate chicken / Jon Ander ate the chicken”

How would your consultant know what context you are assuming?
Eliciting judgements: How?

- **Non-verbal** contexts: Present storyboards, photos, drawings, or videos and ask (i) for a free description of the context, or (ii) whether a given sentence can be used to describe that scenario.

(16)  a. Irakurtzen du.
        read-IMPF aux-TR-3

    b. Irakurtzen arida.
        read-IMPF PROG aux-ITR-3

- What differences do you see between the two sentences given by consultants?
Eliciting judgements: How?

- **Verbal** contexts: Easier to construct and, often, more useful!

- *Step I*: First present the context, then present the target sentence. For every new scenario you are testing, repeat the target sentence.

- Suppose, for example, we are investigating tense, and we have a sentence in the object language that we suspect might contain a past tense morpheme (17).

  \[(17) \text{ Mary danced.}\]

- A hypothetical elicitation is presented in (18), where S represents the sentence containing the suspected past tense morpheme (“F” stands for “fieldworker”, “C” for “consultant”):
Eliciting judgements: How?

(18)  a.  

F: Say that Mary was dancing yesterday and right now she’s resting. 

Could I say S? 

C: Yes, that’s good. 

F: Say that Mary is dancing right now. Could I say S? 

C: No, that’s wrong. 

F: Say that Mary is resting right now, but she’s going to be dancing in an hour. Could I say S? 

C: No, that’s not right.
Eliciting judgements: How?

- Step II: Now you have judgments about a target sentence. You need to construct a minimal pair and test it again.

  (19) a. Mary will dance.

       b. Mary has danced.

       c. Mary had danced.

⇒ Do not try variants of the initial target sentences if you do not know whether it works in the scenarios you have provided.
Interpreting judgements

- How do we learn from judgments? What does it mean for a sentence to be judged **TRUE/FALSE** in scenario?

### Positive Case

If a speaker **accepts** a sentence $S$ in a discourse context $C$, $S$ is **true** in $C$.

### Negative Case

If a sentence $S$ is **false** in a discourse context $C$, speakers will **reject** $S$ in $C$.

- **However**, if the consultant rejects the sentence, this does not automatically mean that the sentence is false.
Interpreting judgements

- The negative case is trickier:

  (20)  a.  
  
  \( F \) Say that there are two cats in the room and they are both asleep. Could I say \textit{the cat is asleep}?

  \( C \): No, that’s wrong.

  b.  
  
  \( F \) Say that all the students in my class passed the exam. Could I say \textit{some of the students past the exam}?

  \( C \): No, that’s wrong.

  \( F \) Say that I know for sure that my friend Bill has exactly two children. Could I say \textit{I believe that Bill has exactly two children}?

  \( C \): Maybe, I’m not sure...
Interpreting judgements

▸ What is going on here?

▸ **Notice**: There are at least two reasons why a consultant might reject a sentence:

1. The sentence is **FALSE**.
2. The sentence is **INFELICITOUS**.

▸ The difference can be tracked down to a difference between **TRUTH VALUE JUDGMENTS** (case 1) and a **FELICITY JUDGMENT** (case 2).

⇒ **A TRUTH VALUE JUDGMENT** tells us whether $S$ is true in $C$.

⇒ **A FELICITY JUDGMENTS** tells us whether $S$ is acceptable in $C$. 
Interpreting judgements

(21)  Context: There are two cats in the room and they are both asleep.

  a. The cats are asleep  \text{TRUE and FELICITOUS}
  b. The cats are awake  \text{FALSE and INFELICITOUS}
  c. #The cat is asleep  \text{TRUE and INFELICITOUS}

\begin{itemize}
  \item You will not find examples were a sentence is FALSE and FELICITOUS.
  \item \text{TRUTH VALUE JUDGMENTS} relate to the \text{TRUTH CONDITIONS} of a sentence (to the \text{assertion}).
  \item \text{FELICITY JUDGMENTS} relate to the presuppositions and implicatures of a sentence.
\end{itemize}
Interpreting judgements

⇒ Knowing whether $S$ is not accepted in $C$ because it is false or infelicitous depends on whether we know the difference between the asserted content and the presuppositions/implicatures of $S$.

Testing for presuppositions (ignore implicatures for the moment): The “Hey, wait a minute!” test.

(22) Context: There are two cats in the room and they are both asleep.

a. $A$: The cat is asleep

b. $B$: Hey, wait a minute! I thought there were two cats in here!

c. $B'$: #Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t know it’s asleep!
Interpreting judgements

- The response (22b) is challenging the uniqueness presupposition of the. The response in (22c) is challenging the assertion that the cat is asleep.

- Speakers don’t usually like to challenge the asserted content with this test!

⇒ Careful! FELICITY JUDGMENTS are more coercible (flexible/adaptable) than TRUTH and FALSITY judgments.

- **Big hint**: “If the consultant gives a ‘question mark’ judgment (e.g., ‘ok but not that great,’ ‘yeah, I guess I would know what you meant,’ etc.), then it is possible one is dealing with infelicity rather than falsity (assuming, as always, that the sentences are grammatical).”
Interpreting judgements

(23)  Context: You are riding the bus with your friend Bill. He says to you, out of the blue,

  a. My cousin looks like Elvis.
  b. #It’s my cousin who looks like Elvis.

> Question: Is (23b) FALSE OR INFELICITOUS in this context?

> Hint: Both sentences are true iff my cousin looks like Elvis!
Interpreting judgements

(24) .Context: Your friend Bill tells you that someone in his family looks like Elvis, but he can’t remember who. You are looking through photos of his family together. Bill sees one of his cousins and says,

a. My cousin looks like Elvis.

b. It’s my cousin who looks like Elvis.

▸ Aha! It seems then that (23b) is INFELICITOUS rather than FALSE.

▸ Question: How do the contexts in (23) and (24) differ?
Interpreting judgements

- One idea: The cleft sentence (23b)/(24b) presupposes that there is someone who looks like Elvis.

- We can apply the “Hey, wait a minute!” test to check whether we can target the putative presupposition.

(25)  


b.  B: Hey, wait a minute! There’s someone who looks like Elvis in your family?

c.  B’: #Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t know that you cousin looks like Elvis!
Interpreting judgements

- Summing Up:

1. Both sentences (23a)/(24a) and (23b)/(24b) have the same TRUTH CONDITIONS.

2. Only (23a)/(24a) is FELICITOUS in the context (23).

3. But both (23a)/(24a) and (23b)/(24b) are FELICITOUS in the context (24).

4. Since in (25b) it passed the “Hey, wait a minute!” test, its INFELICITY can be attributed to a failure in satisfying its presupposition.
Interpreting comments

- What is a comment? A remark offered by the consultant as a reaction to the task he just performed.
- They are not as important as judgments, **but** they offer important clues!

**To keep in mind!**

Keep track of the comments made by your consultant. You may use them in your paper.
Interpreting comments

(26)  **Context**: Your two little cousins are playing in the living room when, suddenly, one of them stumbles upon the tea table and a vase that was standing on it fells down. After the facts, you tell a friend:

el jarrón se dejó dañar por la caída
the vase REFLEXIVE let damage by the fall

**Comment**: Sounds as if it were the vase’s will to be damaged!
Interpreting comments

- **Remember**: During an elicitation session, a sentence may be considered for reasons that you did not anticipate, like mispronunciation, inappropriate lexical choices, lack of attention, etc.

- These reasons have nothing to do with TRUTH/FALSITY.

- Speaker comments often help you find problems of this sort!